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ABSTRACT

Since 1975 a reverse in rural to urban migration has created an increasing population of rural adults who require the availability of continuing education programs; 28.8 % of the population now resides in rural areas. Although characteristics of urban and rural populations differ significantly, both have similar continuing education needs. In October, 1983, the U.S. Department of Education announced a "Rural Education Family Education Policy for the 80's" which recognized rural education's need for equitable services, funds, information, and assistance. Nonetheless, rural learners, often in lower income brackets, may find tuition costs and transportation problems difficult obstacles. Rural learners are often older and less educated than their urban counterparts, which may lead to discomfort and lack of confidence in an educational setting. The Cooperative Extension Service delivers most continuing education programs to rural America. While teacher-class approaches are commonly preferred by rural adults, other delivery systems such as computers, electronic mail systems, mobile vans, seminars, newsletters, correspondence courses, etc., are gaining acceptance and becoming more available. The emergence of a new rural America challenges continuing educators to provide meaningful outreach programs that will be: (1) sensitive to rural needs, (2) practical, (3) empowering, and (4) supported by educational services to assist in balancing job, family, and community responsibilities. (PM)

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RURAL ADULT LEARNERS: AN EMERGING CLIENTELE FOR CONTINUING EDUCATION

Paper Presented at the 70th Annual Conference

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RURAL ADULT LEARNERS: AN EMERGING CLIENTELE FOR CONTINUING EDUCATION

By Bruce O. Barker

The Reality and Nostalgia of Rural America

During the past decade rural America has received increased attention. Since 1975 the rural to urban migration in America--characteristic since World War II--halted, even reversed (Beal, 1975). Today, small towns and hamlets are regaining some of their popularity as urbanites migrate out of densely populated city areas to find more satisfaction in rural life styles.

What is "rural America" and why is this part of our country suddenly experiencing a growth spurt? One of the most difficult tasks encountered in discussing the educational opportunity for rural citizens is the problem of defining the word "rural" (Salmon, 1980). "Rural" has different meanings when viewed historically, statistically, or philosophically (Tamblyn, 1973). As defined in the 1980 U.S. Gensus, the rural population is comprised of all persons living outside urbanized areas in the open country or in communities of less than 2500 inhabitants. This definition also includes individuals living in areas of extended cities with a population density of less than 1000 persons per square mile (CRESS NOTES, 1983/84). Some confusion exists because many small communities of less than 2500 people are adjacent to larger cities and hence the question, "Are they truly rural?" Furthermore, many small towns in excess

of 2500 population which are distant from large metroplexes do not take on genuine urban characteristics until they reach populations of 40,000 to 50,000.

Based on the Census Bureau's definition, 59.5 million people, or 28.8 percent of the U.S. population live in rural settings. This definition implies that rural America collectively consists of all our society's nonmetropolitan areas. Inference is also made that this portion of our society is basically homogeneous in nature and composition. In reality, rural America is a vast array of diverse nonmetropolitan areas which may be internally more homogeneous than most urban communities, but which differ widely from each other. For example, an island hamlet off the coast of Maine, an Alaskan native village near the Arctic Circle, a coal mining town in West Virginia, a ranching area in Wyoming, an impoverished community in the Mississippi Delta, a ski resort section of Vermont, or a prosperous grain farming region in Iowa have little in common, except that they are all classified by the Census Bureau as rural areas of the United States (Sher, 1977).

Although the rural population is marked by diversity and some uncertainty exists regarding definition, rural America is no less real. It is a part of society that does not fit the big city model. From a nostalgic point of view, rural America is the world of small towns, wide-open spaces or rolling hills--a place from which "on a clear day you can see forever." The nation's rural areas are often characterized as places where it takes a long time to get to and upon arrival, might

be missed in two blinks of an eye. It is a world where you personally know most of the people you see and you are known by them. It is a place where people slow down and enjoy life--fresh air, home-cooked meals, neighborhood socials, church bazaars, high school football games, close family ties, country music, and a reverence for the land. Rural America is the world of the farmer, but it is also the world of the commuter, the vacationer, the retired, and those who want to "get away from it all." It is the source of America's natural wealth--coal, gas, oil, minerals, lumber, fiber, agriculture, and fish. And, it is America's heritage--the cowboy, the Indian, the homesteader; and the home of notable personalities--both real and imaginary--Paul Bunyon, Johnny Appleseed, the Lone Ranger, Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, Theodore Roosevelt, Will Rogers, John Wayne, and Norman Rockwell. Rural America is the anchor to which many of us return when searching for stability or as a standard by which to reassess changing values. Any attempt to assess rural America is a difficult one. What many of us believe this part of our society ought to be often makes it difficult to see for what it really is. What it has been often blinds us to what it may become (Kuvlesky and Copp, 1981).

Characteristics of Rural America

Notwithstanding the wide cultural and economic variations between rural communities and the fact that rural areas across the country tend to be more unlike each other than do our nation's large cities, there are dominant demographic and economic conditions associated with being

rural. Rural America is characterized by an agriculture tradition, sparse population, isolation, and the presence of small, loosely knit communities. Rural communities are typically long distances from goods and services, are culturally homogeneous and have little or no public transportation system. (Treadway, 1984; Kulvesky and Copp, 1983; McCannon, 1983). Rural areas are more likely to have a higher percentage of poverty, poorer housing standards, and less opportunity for adequate medical care than metropolitan areas. There are also fewer cultural attractions, limited public services, and less opportunity to attract federal and state funds for educational programs. In short, rural areas have been deprived of an equitable share of America's wealth, thereby excluding many rural citizens from the standard of living enjoyed in urban areas of the United States (Sher, 1977).

While population growth is on the increase in rural America, the U.S. farm population continues to decline. In 1880, 43.8 percent of the total population lived on a farm. One hundred years later the total percent was only 3.4 (Treadway, 1984). It is expected that this percentage will continue to decline as agriculture production becomes more mechanized. By the year 2000, only one or two percent of the population will be needed to produce the food requirements for the rest of the country. The dichotomy between the decrease in farm population and the growth in rural population is causing changes in rural America. Since 1970 the migration of

urban residents to rural areas resulted in a net increase of four million people (Killacky, 1984). These new country dwellers may be retirees, urbanites who seek the slower paced lifestyle of a rural community, or possibly employees of industries which are building new plants in rural areas in an increasing effort to lower operating costs.

Associated with this population shift is increased attention to the educational needs of rural Americans. In October of 1983, the U.S. Department of Education announced a "Rural Education and Rural Family Education Policy for the 80's" at the Annual Conference of the Rural Education Association in Manhattan, Kansas (CRESS NOTES, 1983/84). The statement read:

> The Department of Education recognizes the unique and valuable contributions rural America has made to both the social and economic development of our country. In recent decades, however, the changing dynamics of our urban centers have forced public policy decisions which tend to emphasize solutions to urban concerns rather than rural concerns; this despite the fact that over one-fourth of all Americans still live--and are educated--in areas described as "rural." While the Department of Education remains committed to programs that help urban youth and adults, it is appropriate that we strengthen our efforts to provide programs that address the educational needs of rural and small town youth and adults. Those educated in rural areas must be provided with the basic educational tools necessary to enter an increasingly complex workforce. Rural educators ask no more than "equity" in their attempts to work within the Federal and State education structures to assure rural and small town youth and adults equal educational opportunities. To meet this goal, the Department of Education adopts the following policy:
>
> > Rural Education shall receive an equitable share of the information, services, assistance and funds available from and through the Department of Education and its programs.

Like their urban and suburban counterparts, rural adult learners have a very real need to continue their education. Unemployment,

advances in technology, recertification requirements, career changes, and the continual proliferation of knowledge, are factors which make no distinction between rural or urban constituencies in terms of their impact. The rural learner and the urban student must meet the same academic requirements before being awarded a college degree. Neither do occupational recertification requirements for the various professions differ for residents of small towns or large cities nor do expectations for students enrolled in non-credit enrichment classes. According to McCannon (1983) rural learners act like, look like, and learn like their urban counterparts.

Differences Between Rural and Urban Adult Learners

Although the adult education needs of rural and city people may be very similar, there are distinct differences between the two groups. The most notable difference is in the location of their residences. Rural learners who live in areas of low population density and/or geographic isolation will most certainly be provided fewer educational services and opportunities. The lower income levels of many rural adults, compounded by higher tuition costs gererally associated with outreach programs results in greater financial burdens, thereby limiting accessibility to educational offerings. Also, learners in rural America are highly dependent upon the automobile to travel to learning centers. Poor road conditions, long distances, and increasing fuel and automobile costs have a greater adverse affect on rural citizens than on urban dwellers. In addition, public transportation systems are virtually non-existent in

rural areas.

Other differences include the fact that, on the average, rural adults are older than their urban counterparts and have completed fewer years of formal education (Treadway, 1984). As a result, rural adults are more likely to feel uncomfortable in developing study skills or may lack confidence in their learning ability. They may also feel "too old to learn," as well as fearful of how family members or individuals within the community might react to their interest in education. An associated difference is that rural households are usually larger than urban households (Dejong, 1976; Kreitlow, 1971). This suggests a greater need for family support and child care assistance not only while attending classes, but also when studying at home.

The differences between rural and urban adult learners, by their very nature, create barriers in successfully meeting educational needs. Other obstacles may be caused by colleges and universities themselves. Inflexibility in residency requirements, inconvenient scheduling of classes, inappropriate courses, or requiring that part-time students pay full-time fees cause rural adults to distrust institutions of higher education. Insensitive policies and practices on the part of institutional providers will greatly limit both interest and participation in adult education activities.

Programs and Educational Delivery Systems in Rural America

The Cooperative Extension Service (CES)--made up of the U.S. Department of Agriculture at the national level, the land grant university system at the state level, and the County Extension Office

at the local level--has generally been regarded as the major supplier of educational programs to rural America. The CES's program emphasis includes agriculture, natural resources and environment, home economics, community development, and the 4-H youth program. The CES presently operates in some 3150 counties in the United States and has a staff in excess of 18,000 (Killacky, 1984).

Other institutions commonly recognized as community learning centers in rural America are the community colleges and the public libraries. Based on research findings by Cohen and Brawer (1982), adult student participation in community college programs has generally been to attain short-term goals and has not been in the direction of degree completion or certification. In addition, reduced funding to community colleges will severely handicap their ability to provide outreach programs to rural areas (Cohen and Brawer, 1982). The ability of the public library system to adequately serve rural adult education needs is also questioned. According to Killacky (1984), a review of the literature concerning rural libraries suggests a severe lack of services in general and a very restricted focus on adult education in particular.

The most current and complete compendium of information about successful post-secondary educational programs serving rural adult learners is a publication by the Action Agenda for Rural Adult Post-secondary Education (1984), entitled Serving the Rural Adult: Inventory of Model Programs in Rural Adult Post-secondary Education. Fifty-four exemplary programs operating in 29 different states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia are reported. The programs presented vary in terms of institutional provider, content, and method of delivery. Among the institutional sponsors cited are four-year

colleges and universities, federal and state governmental agencies, private organizations, research institutes, regional libraries, state departments of education, two-year community colleges, and vocational-technical colleges. Programming content includes the offering of undergraduate degrees, job training and professional development programs, non-credit workshops, Adult Basic Education courses, rural focused curricula, and community development activities. The most widely used media for delivery of instruction are video and audio tapes, followed by video teleconferencing, microcomputer use, and audio teleconferencing. The least employed media for instructional delivery are the use of mainframe computers, electronic mail and blackboard systems, satellite TV broadcast, and cable TV. (See Table 1). The most frequently reported format for instructional delivery was traditional classroom instruction followed by "other" which included weekend/evening classes, mobile van, off-campus proctorship (adjunct professors), one-to-one tutoring, student travel, or seminars and newsletters. Multi-site teaching, traveling instructors, computer assisted instruction, and correspondence courses were also frequently used. Instructional formats such as peer teachers, broadcasts to remote sites, and residential institutes were used very infrequently. (See Table 1)

As evidenced, the preferred method of learning for rural adults is the teacher-class approach. This is not to imply that less traditional methods are not accepted. New methods associated with advancing technologies are gaining in acceptance and availability. Indeed, the availability of program offerings has been broadened significantly as a result of technological innovations. Table 2, developed by Grayson (1982),

TABLE 1

TYPES OF TECHNOLOGY EMPLOYED AND INSTRUCTIONAL FORMAT USED IN THE DELIVERY OF ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMS TO RURAL AMERICANS. REPORTED BY INDIVIDUAL PERCENTAGE, 1984.

Technology Used	Percent
Videotapes	51.9
Audio tapes	48.1
Video teleconferencing	18.5
Microcomputers	16.7
Audio teleconferencing	14.8
Mainframe computers	5.5
Electronic mail/blackboard systems	5.5
Satellite broadcast TV	5.5
Cable television	5.5
Other	3.7
Format Used	
Classroom instruction	75.9
Multi-site teaching	53.7
*Other	48.1
Traveling instructor	38.8
Computer assisted instruction	25.9
Correspondence study	24.1
Peer teachers	11.1
Broadcast to remote sites	9.2
Residential institute	5.5

*Note: "Other" formats utilized include weekend/evening classes, mobile van, off-campus preceptorship or field experience, one-to-one tutoring, student travel, seminars and newsletters.

Compiled from data provided by the Action Agenda for Rural Adult Post-Secondary Education, Serving the Rural Adult: Inventory of Model Programs in Rural Adult Post-secondary Education. Boulder, Colorado: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 1984. pp. 153-156.

TABLE 2

CLASSIFICATION OF VARIOUS TECHNOLOGIES USED IN THE DELIVERY OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

	ACCESSIBILITY			
	USED LOCALLY		USED OVER DISTANCE	
CAPABILITY	HARDWARE	TYPICAL APPLICATIONS	HARDWARE	TYPICAL APPLICATIONS
Audio and Audiographic	Audio tapes	Stored lectures and discussions; Instructions	Radio Telephone Dial Access Electronic blackboard Slow-scan television Facsimile	Pre-produced and edited programs; Lectures, seminars and discussions; Retrieval of audio information; Transmission of documents, still images and hand-written information; Audio conferencing
Computer	Mini-computers Personal computers	Computer-assisted instruction; Computer-managed instruction; Computer-aided testing; Problem solving	Central computers; Remote terminals; Time-shared computing	Information retrieval; Computer-assisted instruction; Computer-managed instruction; Computer-aided testing; Problem solving; Electronic message delivery; Computer conferencing
Video	Videotape Videodisc	Stored lectures and presentations Interaction instructional programs	Instructional Television Fixed Service (ITFS) Cable Satellites Broadcast television	Pre-produced and edited programs; Lectures, seminars and discussions Video conferencing

Source: Grayson, L.P. (1982). Encyclopedia of Educational Research.

categorized existing technologies used in education according to their capability (audio, video, or computer) and their accessibility (used locally or over distance). Institutions that provide "remote delivery" of courses should avoid sending out programs that leave the learner totally alone in assimilating the educational material. Site visits by instructors, use of local mentors and coordinators, group discussions, and combining media with teleconferencing are important support strategies to reinforce learner needs.

A Challenge for Continuing Educators

A new rural America is emerging. There can be little question that future population growth will see an increased demand for adult education programs in rural areas. Associated with this demand is a challenge for continuing educators to provide meaningful outreach programs. Program designers should be sensitive to the needs of the traditional rural resident as well as the new in-migrant. In designing and delivering programs, efforts should be made to give rural people a voice in directing adult education activities within these communities. Program offerings should be geared toward practical outcome. Rural residents desire coherent programs of study that lead toward a final goal, not just bits and pieces or smatterings of course offerings. The curricula provided should empower rural people to become informed change agents in their communities. In order to receive optimal benefit from education and training programs, rural adults will also need access to educational support services to assist them in balancing job, family, and community responsibilities. Support services for educational counseling and financial assistance should also be provided.

Rural America includes over one-fourth of the U.S. population. Our society has been and is one which emphasizes freedom, equality, and opportunity. All people, regardless of race, age, income or place of residence should have an opportunity to benefit from quality education. In the past, rural citizens have been denied equal access. Advancements in technology, transportation, and communication have greatly reduced rural America's traditional barriers of remoteness and isolation. This is not to imply that "we have arrived"--rural citizens are still disadvantaged in comparison to their urban and suburban counterparts. Nevertheless, greater efforts are now being made to provide meaningful outreach programs. It behooves continuing educators to (1) recognize rural adults as viable clientele for adult education programs; (2) coordinate across institutional boundaries in order to maximize services to rural areas and to reduce costs; (3) maintain continued interest in the educational needs of rural adults--keep the momentum moving.

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